

## BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of  
*Eat This Book: A Carnivore's Manifesto*

Dominique Lestel (translated by Gary Steiner)

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The symbolism of meat-eating is never neutral. To himself, the meat-eater seems to be eating life. To the vegetarian, he seems to be eating death. There is a kind of gestalt-shift between the two positions which makes it hard to change, and hard to raise questions on the matter at all without becoming embattled.

Mary Midgley (1983, 27)

In *Eat This Book: A Carnivore's Manifesto*, French philosopher Dominique Lestel sets out to demolish the fundamental claims of ethical vegetarianism (including veganism) and to propose as an alternative what he calls ethical carnivorism. The book is translated from the French by prominent animal-rights philosopher Gary Steiner. In his preface, Steiner—echoing a point made by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*—says, “The best way to test one’s own convictions is to open oneself completely to the challenge posed by one’s most strenuous critics or opponents—to confront doubt rather than to seek to extinguish it...” (xv). Those interested in seeking truth, says Steiner, will pay attention to the challenge posed by this work.

I fully agree with the general sentiment. That said, too much of this relatively short book strikes me as less a reasoned challenge than a veritable “Gish gallop” of assertions, characterizations, and questions aimed at ethical vegetarianism, tumbling over each other with little in the way of analysis or argument. Whether it is Lestel’s intention to overwhelm his audience in order to avoid having to delve deeper, I cannot say, but an unsophisticated reader might be forgiven for thinking the case for ethical vegetarianism must be without a logical leg to stand on.

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I have neither the space nor inclination here to look at the cornucopia of Lestel's gallop. (Steiner critiques Lestel, including the claim that plants can suffer, in *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism*, 2013: 218–227.) I am more interested in this book insofar as it is an attempt to *flesh out* what I call “the new argument from nature”. Whereas in the past the predominant justification for using and consuming animals rested on the assertion of human exceptionalism (A. Taylor 2010)—the claim that humans are intrinsically different from and superior to animals (typically, because we are rational, moral agents)—in recent years the argument has flipped around to justifying human exploitation of animals on the basis of our similarities and connections with the rest of animal creation.

Indeed, Lestel creatively argues that it is vegetarians who are driven by a false sense of human exceptionalism. The ethical vegetarian wrongly imagines that we can transcend the natural conditions of existence, which involve the mutual dependence of creatures in a web of predation. “By being willing to eat animals, I acknowledge in particular and in an intimate manner that there are no ‘free lunches’ in the world—that is, that one cannot want to be an animal and at the same time not want to be implicated in the cycles of life and death that are essential to being an animal. I kill in order to live, just like all other animals” (40).

Lestel contends that by rejecting the act of ingesting the bodies of other creatures, the vegetarian refuses to recognize her dependence on others and rejects her own animality. “The central pillar of my argument is that our relationship to animality cannot be purely conceptual; we must truly *live it*, metabolically, in our biological and behavioral body and not simply simulate it in an analytical fashion” (74). This is not exactly to

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attempt to justify the status quo: like various other pro-meat gurus these days, Lestel opposes the factory farming of animals as being incompatible with a proper regard for our place in the natural world. In his case, what is wanted is not an ethic of compassion or of equality but rather an ethic of shared life: “I care for the other because the other is the condition for my existence and I the condition for the other’s existence” (71).

In the book’s final chapter, Lestel launches into a rather bizarre argument for a new kind of social order: what he calls a “constitutional, nonreligious theocracy”. Though not anti-democratic, such a society would be guided by shamans in communication with “disembodied minds”—the nature of these minds being unspecified and mysterious, by his own admission. It is tempting to think that Lestel has simply gone off the deep end here. But a more charitable reading is that he is trying to envision a modern version of indigenous North American societies (he refers specifically to the Iroquois nations, and earlier to the Algonquin). Unlike industrial societies, these peoples have understood themselves to be intimately related in every aspect of their being to a sacred, spirit-filled natural world. In Lestel’s opinion, it is only by introducing a modern version of such a society that the atrocity of the factory farming of animals can be abolished—and that limited, reverential consumption of meat can become the norm.

Leaving aside Lestel’s many questionable claims (e.g., that plants are sentient, that vegetarians have a deep antipathy toward animals, that the ethics of indigenous societies ought to be transplanted directly to the very different circumstances of modern, non-indigenous societies), there remains a large inconsistency at the heart of the “circle of life” view. For human beings this circle of predation and consumption, of consuming

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and being consumed, stays unclosed, at least until our individual deaths, when it can no longer have significance for us. We may imagine that we are immersing ourselves fully in the natural world and reclaiming our animality, but unlike other animals, humans are never asked to pay a price. We are top predators, who have the tools and technology to insulate ourselves ever more effectively from becoming the prey of others.

Typically, those who advocate reclaiming our animality by plunging into the jungle are, rather inconsistently, not willing to abandon the protections afforded by civilization. At least Holmes Rolston III, an environmental philosopher who defends hunting and meat-eating, recognizes that these activities will inevitably involve a form of human exceptionalism. Being aware of our place in the realm of nature, he says, does not mean abandoning the realm of culture. The latter's rules circumscribing behaviour among humans do not apply to our actions toward other creatures. The upshot of this is that "The boundary between animals and humans has not been rubbed out after all; only what was a boundary line has been smeared into a boundary zone" (Rolston 1993, 140).

The most that Lestel suggests by way of reciprocity with non-humans is that instead of our bodies being cremated when we die, they should be buried, to become food for worms. The unacknowledged implication is: While we live, we are monarchs of the world. That given, the injunction of the "circle of life" is that our predation on other species should be carried out with reverence for the bounty of nature and with a view to ecological sustainability. In other words, we must not despoil our kingdom, but our kingdom it remains.

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The philosophy of animal liberation has tended to be naive about the possibility of ending the exploitation of animals that is so deeply entrenched in modern societies. Rational argumentation, whether utilitarian, rights-based, ecofeminist, or whatever, can take us only so far. Beyond that is a complex struggle over ways of viewing the world that plays out at least as much on the basis of emotion, culture, and personal identity (C. Taylor 2010). Although Lestel fails to present a logically sound case against ethical vegetarianism, that fact is unlikely to diminish the lure of the “circle of life” ideology that he articulates. Drive a stake into the heart of exploitation justified by appeal to human exceptionalism and it morphs into exploitation justified by appeal to ideas of predation and ecological balance. The vampire will not die easily.

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